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Items for discussion and decision: drugs and drug use statistics

Report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on drugs and drug use statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2018/227 and past practices, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on drugs and drug use statistics. The report contains a review of recent activities on drugs statistics at the international level, following the discussions on this topic held at the forty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission and at the sixtieth session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

The report contains a review of the activities and accomplishments since the previous report and a description of the challenges that exist and activities to be undertaken. The Commission is invited to take note of recent achievements and to comment on future activities with a view to strengthening the role of official statistics in improving the availability and quality of drugs statistics at the national, regional and global levels.

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I. Introduction and background

1. At its forty-eighth session, the Statistical Commission discussed the topic of drugs statistics on the basis of a report presented by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico (INEGI) (E/CN.3/2017/12). In its decision 48/110 (see E/2017/24, chap.I.C), the Statistical Commission recognized that the Commission on Narcotic Drugs was the United Nations policymaking body with the primary responsibility for drug control matters, and therefore having reviewed and recognized the statistical merits of the road map set out in the report, commended it for the consideration of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs to ensure harmonization with the policy directions of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, and in this regard encouraged collaboration between the Statistical Commission and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

2. In its resolution 60/1 of March 2017, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs confirmed the importance of strengthening national data reporting mechanisms, identifying gaps in current drugs statistics and exploring possibilities to support countries in strengthening existing data collection and analysis tools at the national level. In addition, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs invited UNODC, in close cooperation with Member States, to reflect on possibilities to strengthen and streamline its existing data collection and analysis tools, including improving the quality and effectiveness of the UNODC-managed annual report questionnaire, by which data on drugs is collected worldwide each year.

3. In addition, in its resolution 72/198 on international cooperation to address and counter the world drug problem, the General Assembly reiterated its requests to UNODC to continue to support Member States, upon request, in strengthening their capacity to develop their reporting mechanisms, to reflect on possibilities for strengthening and streamlining its existing data-collection and analysis tools, including improving and strengthening the quality, response rate and effectiveness of the annual report questionnaire, and to report to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs on possible ways to enhance these, for consideration by the Commission at its sixty-second session. The Assembly also welcomed Statistical Commission decision 48/110 of 10 March 2017 on statistics on drugs and drug use and encouraged collaboration between the Statistical Commission and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, within their mandates.

4. In order to respond to such requests, UNODC undertook wide consultation among national authorities and convened an expert consultation meeting from 29 to 31 January 2018. The meeting was attended by representatives from 52 countries and 5 regional and international bodies. Representatives from a variety of national institutions, including from national statistical offices, attended the meeting.

5. The objectives of the meeting were:

(a) To identify and review the statistical methodologies needed to produce better data on drugs;

(b) To review international tools and capacity development activities to improve the capacity of countries to produce, disseminate and share high-quality data on drugs;

(c) To discuss the quality and relevance of data currently collected through the annual report questionnaire and possible ways for improvement.

6. Experts provided guidance on a number of actions to take to improve drugs statistics at the national and international levels. They considered ways to review the global data collection system based on the annual report questionnaire to meet the

information needs indicated in the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem and the outcome document of the 2016 special session of the General Assembly on the world drug problem (resolution S-30/1).

II. Outcomes of consultations with national experts

7. Experts identified a number of activities to improve statistical information on drugs, both at the national and international levels. The following key elements emerged from the expert discussions:

A. Supporting statistical infrastructure and drug monitoring systems at the national level

8. Experts agreed on the need to foster cooperation and the flow of information among various national and subnational entities that are the primary sources of data related to drugs. Efforts in that direction should address the needs for coordination and harmonization of statistical data across different institutions and jurisdictions, as well as between related but distinct spheres of competence (e.g. customs and police forces).

9. Expert highlighted the need to build and strengthen national systems for monitoring the drug problem, including information systems and the institutional and technical infrastructure to facilitate the collection, consolidation and analysis of data related to drugs. Participants underlined the importance of having national drug observatories that could set up and coordinate information systems to collect and analyse data on all facets of the drug problem in a given country.

B. Developing statistical methodologies on drugs

10. Several areas were identified in which the production of data on drugs would benefit greatly from methodological guidelines. These should address both the need for standardized and more precise definitions of certain indicators and the corresponding appropriate data sources, as well as the methods and statistical procedures that are most appropriate for the production of high-quality data.

11. Examples of topics where methodological guidance was needed include guidelines on the conduct of drug use surveys, the estimation of the size of the population in need of drug treatment, the production of consistent data on drug prices and the implementation of surveys among detainees. There was also mention of the need to develop a standardized approach to computations in relations to Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.5.1 on the coverage of treatment interventions (pharmacological, psychosocial and rehabilitation and aftercare services) for substance use disorders.

C. Reviewing the annual report questionnaire

12. Experts highlighted the need to improve data collection on selected topics to better respond to the information needs deriving from the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action and the outcome document of the 2016 special session of the General Assembly. For example, topics in need of more comprehensive data included severe and high-risk drug users, persons in treatment, the health consequences of drug use

(morbidity and mortality), links between drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime, drug-related illicit financial flows, and drugs and the criminal justice system.

13. Ways to streamline the annual report questionnaire to minimize the reporting burden of countries and to enhance the response rate were discussed, including reviewing the scope and complexity of the questions, as well as exploring improvements to the structure of the questionnaire and to the data collection cycle.

14. Participants also agreed on the need to incorporate the gender dimension wherever relevant through the systematic sex-disaggregation of all relevant questions and the inclusion of questions that could highlight gender disparities, such as questions on morbidity, mortality, the provision of treatment services and criminal justice.

D. Strengthening expert networks at the regional and international levels

15. National experts highlighted the importance of establishing national, regional and global networks to foster the production and use of consistent, comprehensive and comparable data, and in providing a forum for the sharing of best practices and for peer support. Such networks could be especially productive at the regional level, given that they would facilitate the exchange of solutions among experts faced with similar circumstances and challenges.

16. Experts recognized that the appointment of national focal points, building on experience in the collection of data on crime and criminal justice through the UNODC-administered United Nations Survey of Crime Trends, Operations of Criminal Justice Systems and Crime Prevention Strategies, would facilitate an improvement in the quality and coverage of data collected through the annual report questionnaire.

E. Enhancing inter-agency cooperation

17. Data relevant to drugs are collected by a variety of international and regional bodies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the World Customs Organization, the International Narcotics Control Board, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission and the African Union. Areas of complementarity exist between UNODC and other international organizations, while areas of overlap may exist with regional entities. Experts stressed the importance of avoiding duplication of efforts and also recognized the need for harmonization of related concepts used in data collection by different entities.

18. Experts highlighted the need to consult with appropriate international stakeholders to ensure that developments in relation to the annual report questionnaire and other relevant data collection activities are efficient, avoid duplication of effort and better meet international commitments, such as the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, experts invited international entities to continue the dialogue within the inter-agency technical working group on drug epidemiology statistics, as this could have implications for the content of the annual report questionnaire.

19. Considering the reporting burden on countries, experts felt that it would be useful in the medium term to explore joint data collection with regional bodies on drugs data, as is currently the case with crime data in the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends, Operations of Criminal Justice Systems and Crime Prevention Strategies.

III. Current activities and next steps

20. The expert consultation provided a unique opportunity for national experts from all regions to engage in a technical discussion on common information needs and challenges with a view to advancing the scientific understanding of the drug problem. The meeting served as a forum to exchange practices and experiences to address such challenges. The deliberations among experts proved to be a valuable way to discuss concrete, effective and scientifically sound ways to improve national drug information systems and the quality and availability of drug-related data at the international level.

21. While recognizing the benefit of streamlining the annual report questionnaire and improving its effectiveness in describing the world drug problem, participants repeatedly highlighted the value of the annual report questionnaire as a tool to gather and make available key information about patterns, scope and trends in the various dimensions of the drug problem, both at the international and national levels. Besides its role in collecting and disseminating information, participants saw the annual report questionnaire as a tool to foster standardization of data processes and spur communication among relevant national stakeholders.

22. After the expert consultation and following the mandate by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the current focus of UNODC activities on drugs statistics has been on the review of the annual report questionnaire and on effective ways to support countries in improving the quality and availability of drugs statistics.

23. In addition to the regular activities related to global, regional and drug-specific monitoring systems and support for countries in conducting drug-related surveys (for example, to monitor drug use and illicit crops), new methodological work carried out by UNODC has focused on developing a statistical framework to measure illicit financial flows, including those related to illicit drugs, on improving drug-related mortality data and on Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.5.1. Technical assistance and capacity-building activities have also been regularly conducted.

24. March 2019 will represent another milestone for the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. A ministerial segment, to be held during the sixty-second session of the Commission, will take stock of the implementation of the commitments made to jointly address and counter the world drug problem, in particular in the light of the 2019 target date established in the 2009 Political Declaration. In preparation for the high-level event, the Commission held a series of intersessional meetings in the lead up to the reconvened sixty-first session of the Commission, in December 2018. During those meetings, representatives of many countries highlighted the importance of promoting and improving the collection, gathering and sharing of reliable and comparable data, as well as possible synergies with Sustainable Development Goal indicators, as a priority for work in 2019 and beyond. Formal and informal discussions also dealt with how the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and Statistical Commission could collaborate to ensure that drugs statistics benefit from the policy directions of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the technical statistical competence of the Statistical Commission.

25. UNODC plans to hold a second global consultation on drugs statistics in July 2019 to finalize a proposal for a revised annual report questionnaire and to better define a road map for developing global standards and supporting countries in generating more and higher quality data for the benefit of designing national policies and improving global knowledge of the drug problem. Such efforts would also help to measure progress made in the implementation of the joint commitments made over the past decade to address and counter the world drug problem, through a so-called "one-track approach" in 2019 and beyond. The consultation would represent an

opportunity to bring together experts from the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the Statistical Commission and Member States to join forces to define the basis for the global impetus to improve drug information systems and ensure that drugs statistics are produced and disseminated in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

26. UNODC has also planned an assessment study to provide better targeted support to national systems that produce drugs statistics. The study will be based on a survey to be conducted by UNODC in partnership with international and regional partners to better understand the functioning, capacities and outputs of those national systems, the availability and quality of drugs statistics and how the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are implemented in the production of drugs statistics. Findings from the assessment will be used to improve national and international reporting of drugs-related data and to conduct more targeted capacity-building activities.

IV. Recommendations

27. **The Statistical Commission may wish to:**

(a) **Affirm its renewed availability to collaborate with the Commission on Narcotic Drugs on statistical matters relating to drugs and consider ways to further strengthen such a partnership with a view to improving the quality and availability of statistics on drugs. In particular, the Statistical Commission might consider ways to participate in the annual report questionnaire revision process and in the definition of a renewed plan to improve the quality and availability of drugs statistics;**

(b) **Invite national statistical offices to strengthen their participation in the production and dissemination of drugs statistics and in the improvement of related methodological standards, including on drug use surveys, illicit financial flows related to drugs, and drug-related morbidity and mortality;**

(c) **Invite national statistical offices to promote initiatives to foster the coordination of national institutions involved in drugs statistics;**

(d) **Invite UNODC, in partnership with other international agencies, to conduct a survey to better understand the functioning, capacities and outputs of national statistical systems on drugs, the availability and quality of drugs statistics and the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;**

(e) **Invite the donor community to strengthen global and regional efforts to support countries in improving national drugs statistics;**

(f) **Invite international and regional organizations, including the African Union, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, UNAIDS, UNODC, the World Customs Organization and WHO to strengthen their cooperation and collaboration in the field of drugs statistics with a view to increasing the consistency of data and minimizing the reporting burden of Member States.**